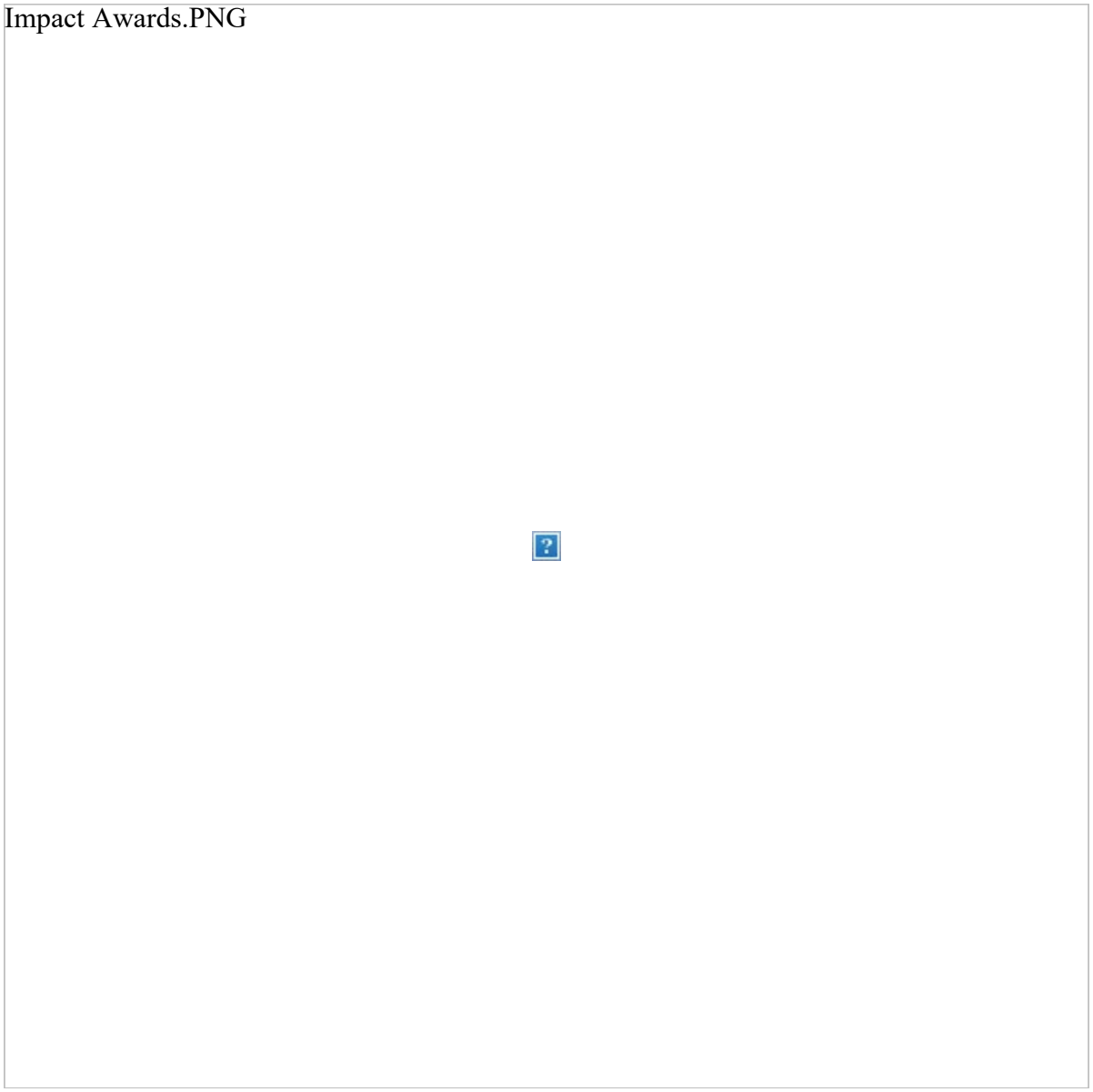
From: Inside WCU
To: Kelli Brown
Subject: Impact Award Recipients 2026
Date: Wednesday, April 29, 2026 4:10:11 PM

Impact Awards.PNG



Each year, Western Carolina University and the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) recognize projects and individuals that have made a significant contribution to the university's community engagement and regional impact mission.

Thank you to everyone who submitted the many outstanding nominations this year and congratulations to the exemplary award winners, presented below.

The Impact Awards will be formally presented on June 10th at Seeds and Soil,

WCU's annual community partner networking and professional development event. Award recipients will receive an invitation via email. For those who are not able to attend, CCESL will make separate arrangements to deliver the award.

2026 Impact Award Recipients

Community-Engaged Teaching, Learning & Research Award

Interdisciplinary Dementia Care Course and The Healthy Brain Club

Community-Engaged Outreach Award

Weaving a Rebozo- Evaluating Stakeholder Needs and Coordinating Community Resources for Rural Latine and Hispanic Families in WNC

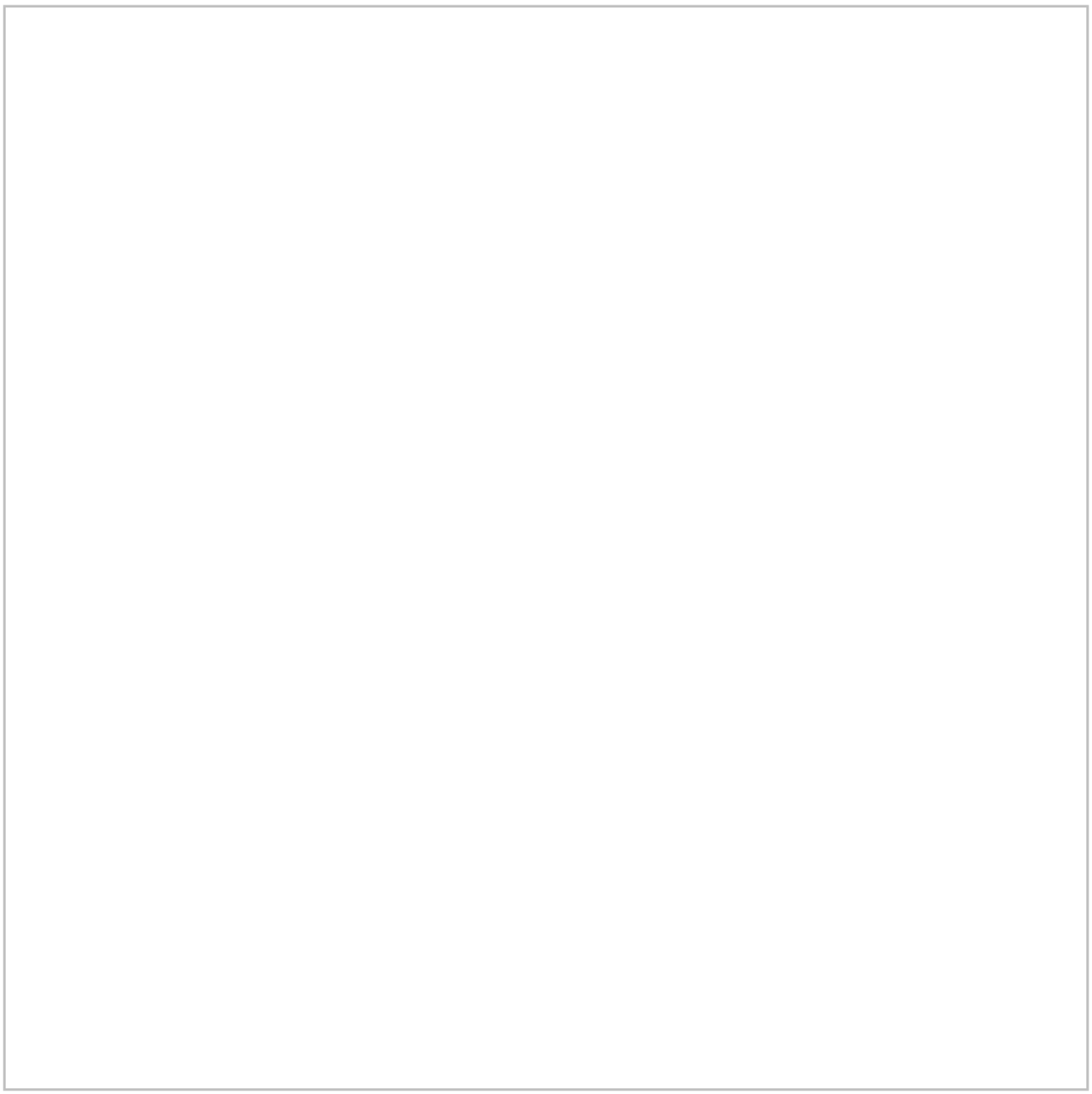
Community and Civic Engagement Achievement Award

Katerina Spasovska

Blair Tormey

CCESL Partner of the Year Award

Chelsea Reavis



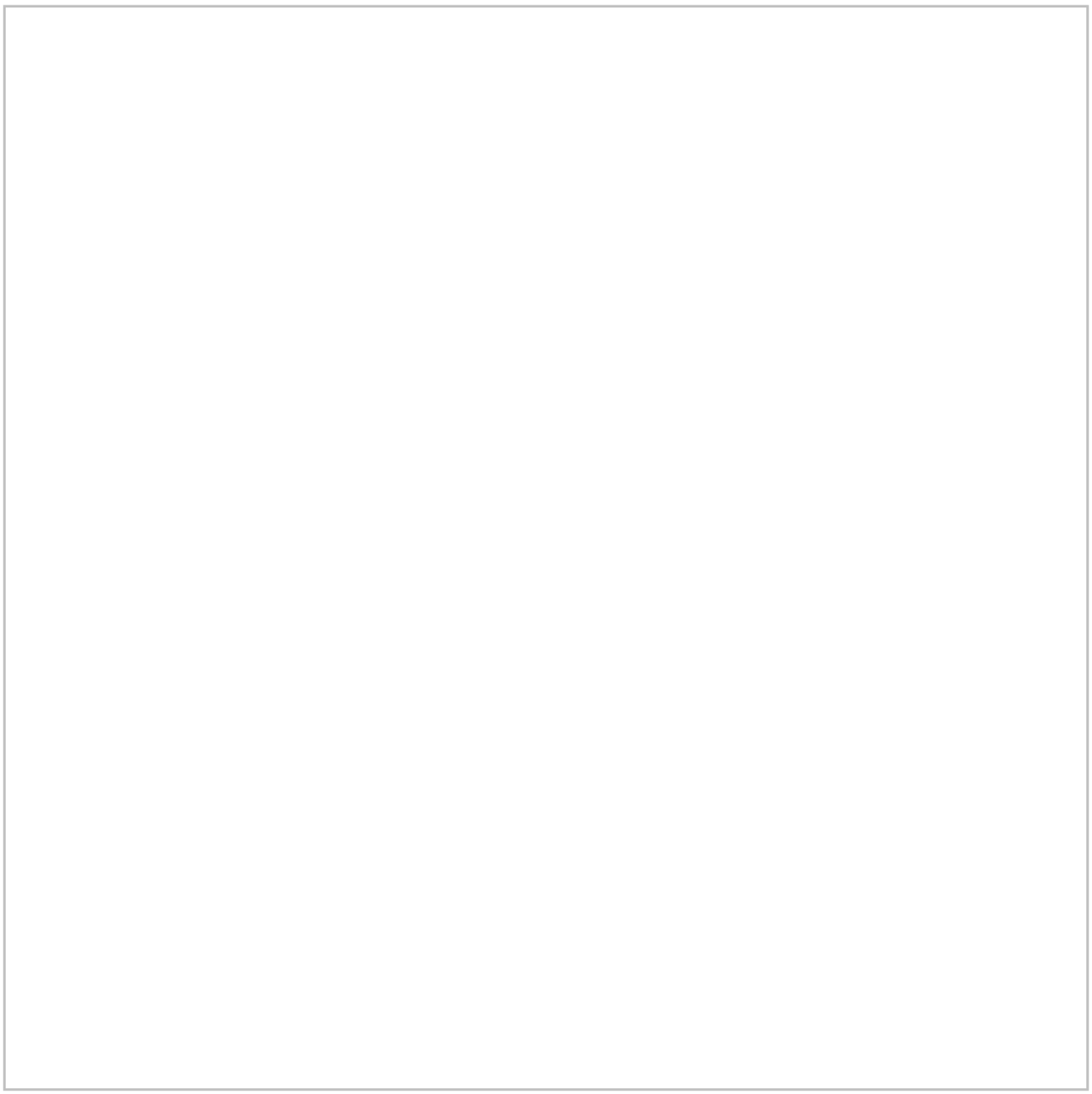
Community-Engaged Teaching, Learning & Research Award
This award reflects community engagement projects involving teaching, learning, and research activities led by any instructor that engage faculty, students, and community partner(s) in a mutually beneficial collaboration.

Winner: Interdisciplinary Dementia Care Course and The Healthy Brain Club

The CSD 494: Interdisciplinary Dementia Course and The Healthy Brain Club is a service-learning initiative designed to address the shortage of dementia-capable healthcare professionals while providing critical support to families in rural Western North Carolina. WCU students receive a 4-week period of intensive classroom instruction followed by 12 weeks of hands-on learning facilitating programming for older adults with dementia and a respite for their caregivers.

The faculty team manages the transition from theory to practice by providing direct supervision during respite sessions. Students are responsible for planning and delivering evidence-based, dementia-appropriate activities, such as musical exercises and group games. This model incentivizes student engagement through course credit while addressing a critical service gap in Jackson County, where no other dementia-specific respites previously existed.

Project collaborators are Debbie Logan (Recreational Therapy), Leigh Odom, (Communication Sciences and Disorders), Francine Sheppard (Nursing), Caitlin Torrence (Integrated Health Sciences), Jamie Davis (Jackson County Department on Aging), Sarajane Melton (Southwestern Commission Area Agency on Aging), and Mitch Boughman (Cullowhee United Methodist Church).



Community-Engaged Outreach Award

This award reflects community engagement projects led by a WCU employee or student that provide institutional resources or services to address a community-identified need.

Winner: Weaving a Rebozo- Evaluating Stakeholder Needs and Coordinating Community Resources for Rural Latine and Hispanic Families in WNC

Rebozo was developed as a shared commitment to support the clinical, educational, mental health, and psychological needs of bilingual Latine families, children, and adolescents in and around Jackson County. Across disciplines, rural Latine communities face distinct challenges compared to those in urban settings, requiring more contextually grounded approaches. Working with stakeholders in

the community, the Rebozo Research Network (comprised of WCU faculty) formed an advisory board, collaboratively developed a community-landscape survey, administered the survey, and collected qualitative data through focus groups. This community-engaged participatory research initiative actively involves families, children, providers, and community stakeholders as co-investigators in shaping a shared research agenda. Data was collected using a combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to capture both quantitative insights and in-depth experiences to better understand the unique challenges and strengths that Latine families demonstrate in accessing care in their rural communities. The Rebozo Research Network plans to continue its collaborations with community stakeholders to support initiatives related to improving healthcare and educational access for rural immigrant families.

Project collaborators are Claire Wofford (Communication Science and Disorders), Nancy Valverde, Melissa Mecadon-Mann, Loidaly Gonzalez-Rosario (Counseling), Sarah Pedonti (Birth-Kindergarten Education), Alleyne Broomell (Psychology), Erin Callahan (English/TESOL), Adrienne Stuckey (Special Education), Karla Magana (Highlands International Friendship Center), Ricardo Bello Ball and Sarah Hirsch (UNIDXS), Laura Zapater Urrea (Centro Unido), Luisa McMahan, Brandon McDevitt, Lisa Dean (Jackson County Public Schools), Alex Ramos, Margarita Ramirez, Marianne Martinez (Vecinos), Silvia Martin del Campo Vargas (McDowell Technical Community College), Loidaly Gonzalez-Rosario (De Colores Family Wellness), Dee Pedroza (McDowell County Schools), Geny Hernández López (Colaborativa La Milpa), and Greta Metcalf (HIGHTS).

Community and Civic Engagement Achievement Awards

These awards reflect individual community members, staff, faculty or students who demonstrate sustained effort and significant commitment to service and/or empowering others to participate in civic activities, making a positive societal impact.

Winner: Katerina Spasovska, Associate Professor, Department of Communication

In the fall of 2010, Dr. Spasovska founded The Western Carolina Journalist, a web-based newsroom embedded in the journalism curriculum that has since enabled nearly 300 students to produce more than 2,300 edited news and multimedia stories serving Western North Carolina. She has also built sustained

partnerships with regional outlets, most notably, The Sylva Herald, formalizing student reporting collaborations in 2017 and expanding them in 2023 through grant-supported, in-depth investigative work that strengthens both student learning and local news coverage in a rural media landscape. Beyond the classroom, Dr. Spasovska shares her expertise nationally through the Society of Professional Journalists, helping launch the Newsroom to Newsroom Mentoring Project. She consistently goes beyond contractual expectations by creating specialized practicums, coordinating multi-platform election coverage, and mobilizing students to deliver critical radio news during crises such as Hurricane Helene when other communication systems failed. Since arriving at WCU as—and remaining—the sole journalism professor, Dr. Spasovska has demonstrated extraordinary dedication to her students, the university, and the region by advancing local journalism and preparing the next generation of reporters.

Winner: Blair Tormey, Coastal Research Scientist/Research Faculty, Program for the Study of Developed Shorelines

Since 2009, Blair Tormey has used ground-penetrating radar to map sensitive historic sites. Recognizing a critical need in the region, Blair shifted focus to mapping and preserving African American cemeteries in 2016. Blair has since documented ~350 graves at nine sites across western North Carolina. Over half of these graves were unmarked and otherwise lost, and Blair's work resulted in commemorative monuments at six locations. Blair's initial efforts (2016-2021) mapped graves of enslaved and formerly enslaved African Americans at Freedom Cemetery in Hayesville and three cemeteries in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Subsequent work (2022-2023) located the mass-burials of incarcerated African American laborers buried along the tracks during construction of the railroad between Old Fort and Swannanoa in the 1870s. Most recently (2024-2026), Blair mapped segregated African American graves at Davidson River Cemetery in Brevard, Hamp Gap Cemetery in Mars Hill, and Old Field Cemetery in Sylva. Without this work, crucial portions of local history would go unspoken and unrecognized.

Community-Engaged Teaching, Learning & Research Award (28).png

CCESL Partner of the Year Award

This award recognizes an individual whose skills, perspectives, and partnership significantly contributed to the mission and impact of the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning.

Winner: Chelsea Reavis, Associate Director, Parking Operations

Chelsea is an integral part of helping to ensure that students have access to a voting site, whether on or off campus. She serves on the voting site committee and goes above and beyond as a committee member to support the Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning (CCESL) in its role as a liaison to the Jackson County Board of Elections. She helped with nonpartisan civic engagement from assisting with complex logistics to personally driving the shuttle

to the nearest election site nearly every day of early voting and on Election Day during the 2026 primary elections. Chelsea exceeds expectations in helping to arrange CCESL event parking for local non-profit partners and government agencies. Her professionalism, quick response, and attention to detail ensure that these important regional partners have access to parking and transportation services, enabling them to attend valuable networking meetings and professional development sessions on campus. Chelsea is masterful at problem-solving in real time, adapting, and stepping in wherever needed. Chelsea is a valued partner to CCESL and the entire WCU community.

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